The Mess Inside
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To Sophie
As a rule is it with great difficulty that men abandon their physiological memories and the mould in which they are cast by heredity; to do so a man must be either particularly unpassioned and featureless or absorbed in abstract pursuits. The impersonality of mathematics and the unhuman objectivity of nature do not call forth those sides of the soul and do not awaken them; but as soon as we touch upon questions of life, of art, of morals, in which a man is not only an observer and investigator but at the same time himself a participant, then we find a physiological limit—which it is very hard to cross with one’s old blood and brains unless one can erase from them all traces of the songs of the cradle, of the fields and the hills of home, of the customs and whole setting of the past.

(Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*)

He would reason about people’s conduct as though a man were as simple a figure as, say, two sticks laid across each other; whereas a man is much more like the sea whose movements are too complicated to explain, and whose depths may bring up God only knows what at any moment.

(Joseph Conrad, *The Warrior’s Soul*)
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This book is about the ways in which we think about our lives—our present, our past, and our future—in narrative terms.

Chapter 1 introduces the contentious notion of narrative. I argue, contrary to many views, that narratives need not be publicly narrated, but can be just thought through in acts of narrative thinking. In Chapter 1, I also introduce the notion of perspective, grasp of which is essential to a proper grasp of narratives. A perspective can be internal to a narrative, being the perspective of a ‘character’ in the narrative, or the perspective can be external to the narrative, being the perspective of for example, the narrator, or the audience. These perspectives can, of course, diverge.

Chapter 2 develops the notion of perspective in autobiographical narrative thinking, where the narrator, with his or her external perspective, is the very same person as the ‘character’ in the narrative. These potentially diverging perspectives are at the heart of narrative thinking about our past, and I show this through the idea of dramatic irony in autobiographical narrative thinking, where you now know things about your past that you then, in the past, did not know. And this in turn allows me to introduce a notion familiar in literary theory and narratology, but little discussed in philosophy: the notion of free indirect style, which is a literary device that is very common in modern literature. Very roughly, with free indirect style it becomes unclear whether the perspective being expressed in the narrative is that of a character internal to the narrative or that of the narrator. Drawing on some of the fascinating recent empirical work on personal memories, I then show how our memories of our past can be infused with the irony of what we now know, and what we now feel about what we now know, through the psychological equivalent of free indirect style.

In Chapter 3, as a kind of case study, I apply these ideas to narratives of grief, and, more widely, of narratives of past traumatic experiences. Against the vast majority of contemporary philosophical views about emotion, I argue that grief (and I believe other emotions too) is a kind of process, not a kind of mental state or event. Furthermore, I argue, a narrative is the ideal kind of account of the process of grief. I then discuss how our
capacity to narrate our past breaks down after some kinds of traumatic experience, tragic loss being one such, and consider this in relation to what I call the desire for emotional closure. In both fiction and in real life narratives, emotional closure, like narrative closure in this respect, is something of an ideal: closure, however much aspired to, is never really reached, and remains illusory.

Chapter 4 turns to narrative thinking about our future, and its role in planning, forming policies, and making resolutions. Here I discuss the many structural parallels between imagination and memory, and the role of our emotions in response to what we imagine in making our plans. I then discuss how we can learn from our mistakes, and generally how narrative thinking about our past in emotional terms can inform our narrative thinking about our future.

In Chapter 5, in my second case study, I apply the ways in which we engage in narrative thinking about our future to self-forgiveness—a notion that many consider to be deeply suspect, as if by a simply fiat one can forgive oneself for some past wrongdoing. I show that self-forgiveness is not only coherent, but also that it is something that we often need for good ethical reasons (not just for reasons of self-interest), and that, when properly understood, it is by no means as easily won as its critics would suppose; the elusiveness of closure again plays a part here. Finally I contrast the possibility of self-forgiveness with the impossibility of self-pardon.

Chapter 6 is about the narrative sense of self: the sense that we have of ourselves as having a narratable past and future. I argue that the narrative sense of self is not at all the same thing as a sense of a narrative self. In fact, I think that there is no interesting notion of a narrative self: a self that is in some way constituted by the narratives that we tell about our lives. I also dissociate the narrative sense of self from questions of personal identity—one’s narrative sense of self as I conceive it really has no direct connection with the metaphysical question of one’s numerical identity over time, although I believe the narrative sense of self presupposes it. Generally, I argue that we can have a clear and distinct idea of what a narrative sense of self is without committing ourselves to any particular account of personal identity over time; and this, I believe, is a merit of my account.

Chapter 7 addresses a concern about narratives that is often voiced: whether narratives about our lives are capable of truth and objectivity. We need to be especially careful what we mean by these terms here: truth is not simply a matter of the constituent propositions in the narrative
satisfying some minimal truth schema; and achieving objectivity is not simply a matter of providing or thinking through a narrative whose content expresses a perspective which can be shared by all reasonable people. But still, I argue, narratives are capable of truth and objectivity properly understood, and this in spite of the fact that, as a matter of human psychology, we tend to bestow our lives with a degree of narrativity which is often more appropriate to traditional fiction than it is to real life.

I have more people to thank than I could possibly mention here, including all those who have heard and commented insightfully on the ideas expressed in this book, and in journal papers and edited books. Special thanks for their help are owed to H. Porter Abbott, Simon Beck, Monika Bezler, Michael Bratman, Cindy Chung, Gregory Currie, Dorothea Debus, Ronald de Sousa, Russell Downham, Eric Eich, John Gibson, Charles Griswold, Tilmann Habermas, Paul Harris, Kathleen Higgins, Peter Hobson, Katharine Jenkins, Matthew Kieran, Peter Lamarque, Anthony Marcel, Alba Montes, Adam Morton, Kevin Mulligan, Robin le Poidevin, Anna Reboul, Robert Roberts, Jenefer Robinson, Louise Roska-Hardy, Marya Schechtman, David Shoemaker, Joel Smith, Helen Steward, Galen Strawson, John Sutton, Thomas Uebel, Samantha Vice, and Gary Watson, many of whom took the trouble to read through and comment on all or large parts of earlier drafts. I also would like to thank Peter Momtchiloff and his colleagues at Oxford University Press for their support, as well as the anonymous readers for OUP, whose comments have been invaluable, and, finally and uniquely, Derek Matravers.

P.G.

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1

Narrative Thinking

Introduction: Finding the Right Place for Narrative in Our Lives

Positions can get polarized. At one pole, there are the narrativists, as we might call them, who hold one or more of a cluster of strong views about the place of narratives in our lives. Our lives are, in some sense, lived narratives of which we are the authors. Our lives are somehow only comprehensible through a narrative explanatory structure. Our lives bear close similarities to (or are even fundamentally the same as) the lives of characters in literature. Our having the right kind of narrative of our lives is, in some sense, integral to or constitutive of our being the persons that we are. Our very survival depends on our having such a narrative.

At the other pole, reacting against these excesses of narrativity, there are the sceptics about the place of narratives in our lives. Narratives are not an especially interesting kind of thing. Narratives, whatever they might be, do not play any significant part in our understanding of our lives, or in living a life. Nor should they. Narratives of our lives are fundamentally perspectival, and can be deeply distorting of reality, of truth, of objectivity, and of what it is to be a person. Narratives have their proper home in literature, but no place in real life.

Between these two polarized clusters of views, however, much is possible. In this book, I will be arguing, in disagreement with the anti-narrativists, that narrative has a very important role in our lives: in our thinking about our own past and about our plans for the future; in our thinking about how things might have been; in our sense of ourselves as having a past and a future; and in other ways too. In doing this, however, I will not be arguing in favour of any of the above narrativist views. So the central task I have set myself is to find the right place for narrative in our
lives, without any of the narrativist excesses that one sometimes finds these days, and without a recoil to an unwarranted anti-narrativist scepticism.

The first task, though, one for this chapter, is to give an outline of what a narrative is. I say ‘an outline’ because the details will emerge as I progress; to begin with, I just want to fix a rough idea.

What a Narrative Is

Roughly, then:

A narrative or story is something that can be told or narrated, or just thought through in narrative thinking. It is more than just a bare annal or chronicle or list of a sequence of events, but a representation of those events which is shaped, organized, and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure—coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import—to what is related.

This is quite a dense statement, so I will try to unpack it, and to make some pointers towards more detailed unpacking in later chapters.

A narrative or story is something that can be told or narrated

There is a familiar distinction between a narrative as a product, and a narrative as a process. The product is the content of what is narrated—the story that is told. So when we say that someone’s chosen narrative was the incestuous love of Phaedra for Hippolytus, it is the product that we have in mind—the content of the story that he or she chose to tell, the story about this incestuous love.

The process sense of narrative is the process, the activity, of producing a particular narrative, whether for the first time or not. It is this sense we have in mind when we say, for example, that the narrative at the dinner party of the incestuous love of Phaedra for Hippolytus took much too long, or that the narrative of Phaedra and Hippolytus unfortunately took place against the sound of a brass band playing in an upstairs room.

Sometimes we also speak of a narrative in a third sense, as a particular text, as we might say that the narrative of Euripides in the original Greek was in front of the person whilst he or she was narrating the story of
Phaedra and Hippolytus. In what follows, the meaning will usually be clear from the context, but where it is not I will disambiguate.¹

The notion of a narrative as a product can be taken widely, to include anything that has what I will call narrative structure. Or it can be taken narrowly, to include only those things that have narrative structure and that also imply the existence of a narrator. In general, I want to take the notion widely, so that a narrative or story can include dramas, such as films, plays, or operas that have narrative structure, even though these media do not imply the existence of a narrator.²

A narrative can be just thought through in narrative thinking

Whether or not the notion of narrative is taken in this wide sense to include drama, most theorists of narrative, with a few exceptions, take the notion narrowly in another sense. They take the notion of narrative as product to be a notion of something that is necessarily public, involving written, or spoken, or signed, language, or some other product that in some way or other is necessarily already in the public domain.³

But this is too narrow. The notion of narrative as product can readily, and in an intuitively satisfying way, be widened to include the product of narrative thinking. Narrative thinking involves not text or discourse, but another kind of representation: thoughts. So, on this second wider notion of narrative as product, a narrative can be thought through, but there need be no public product as a result of a communicative event; there need be

¹ For discussion of these distinctions, see Lamarque (2004) and Wilson (2003). The Russian formalists made a distinction that should not be confused with the ones I have just made. This is between fabula and syuzhet, where (very roughly) the term ‘fabula’ picks out the events that are related, whilst the term ‘syuzhet’ refers to the order of events as they are presented in the narrative text. So the syuzhet of Almodovar’s film Broken Embraces (2009) begins in the present day with the protagonist blind, and then flashes back to the 1990s, whereas the fabula of the film begins with the events that took place in the 1990s and that are being looked back on at the beginning of the syuzhet. French structural analysts have used histoire or récit for fabula, and discours for syuzhet. All these terms can be confusing for native English speakers, partly because the terms ‘plot’ and ‘story’ cut across the distinctions that are being made (Brooks 2002: 130–1). So I will from now on avoid use of these terms.

² Not surprisingly, it is controversial whether film, for example, necessarily involves a narrator, but it is a dispute I wish to avoid.

³ See e.g. Peter Lamarque, who says that ‘Narratives must be related: that is how they come into being’ (2007: 396, cf. 394, 402, 404). And Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg begin their book The Nature of Narrative thus: ‘By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller’ (Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg 1966: 4).
no public act of narration. A narrative that is thought through in this sense will involve certain sequences of thought, feeling, and imagination—sequences that have, as I will argue, narrative structure. On this doubly wide notion of narrative, then, a narrative is something that can be, but need not be, told or narrated to others in a variety of different ways: it could be spoken, written down, drawn, acted, sung, mimed, danced, filmed, or communicated through some combination of these. Narrative thinking is narratable, communicable, but need not be publicly narrated or communicated to another person.

This wider notion of narrative, as publicly narratable but not necessarily actually publicly narrated, is by no means arbitrary or ad hoc: it is part of our everyday, commonsense idea of what narrative is. To show this, imagine that Italo Calvino conjured up in his mind one of his inimitable short stories, and, before he was able to write it down or communicate it to anyone in any other way, he died. Surely we would say that the world had lost something—we had lost a wonderful story of Calvino’s. Or, to make the same point with a different example, imagine that something surprising happened to me whilst I was walking the dog this morning, alone on the beach; when I return home, after a bit of rehearsal to myself about how best to relate what happened, I might say to my partner, ‘I’ve got an amazing story to tell you about my walk this morning.’ The story, the narrative, is already there, in my mind, waiting to be told to another for the first time.

I can think through a narrative in a variety of ways, each of which will be relevant in different ways in subsequent chapters: remembering, perhaps episodically or experientially, some events that happened to me or that I observed; hypothesizing what might happen in the future; thinking through a narrative propositionally; mentally rehearsing it, as one might mentally rehearse a speech; using perceptual imagination to, for example, visualize what might happen; thinking through an episode of events coolly with little or no emotional engagement; thinking through the episode vividly and highly emotionally; thinking of ‘that terrible quarter of an hour when I thought that all was lost’; thinking through how things might have turned out differently if I hadn’t made that terrible mistake; and in lots of other ways, many of which cross-cut with each other.

Generally, I will use the term ‘thinking through’ to encompass all kinds of narrative thinking by which an episode comes to be mentally represented in narrative form. So thinking through is very much like conceiving,
understood in the relatively loose sense used by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of take into or form in the mind, where in narrative thinking what is taken into or formed in the mind is a narrative.\(^4\) This sense of conceiving is meant to be neutral as to where, on any particular occasion, conceiving falls within the spectrum of ways in which an episode can be represented in narrative thinking. It is also meant to be neutral as to whether the thinking through takes place as a process carried out deliberately and with conscious intent, perhaps with methodical care; or whether the narrative is thought through or conceived more or less ‘all at once’, in a single spontaneous moment of thought, without any conscious intention on the thinker’s part.\(^5\) More specific terms, such as ‘imagine’ or ‘remember’ or ‘plan’ or ‘reconstruct’ or ‘think over’, are often more natural ones to use than ‘think through’ or ‘conceive’, but what I need here are terms that are as neutral as possible both as to the kind of content of the narrative that is thought through and as to the manner of thinking through of the narrative.

It might be objected here that this notion of narrative thinking fails to maintain the distinction between narrative as process and narrative as product. But this is not so, as can be seen by considering the narrative of that *mauvais quart d’heure*. Without ever having related it to anyone else, I can readily refer to that narrative as product, without, in so referring to it, actually going through the process of thinking it through; I might, for example, think to myself, ‘Don’t think about that *mauvais quart d’heure*.’ We can also see that the distinction remains in place by considering how one tries to work through a narrative in one’s mind. The two-timing spouse might be trying to craft a mendacious story to tell her husband about what she was doing earlier that evening—she doesn’t yet have a persuasive narrative, and that narrative, as a product, is precisely what she is trying to work through in the process of narrative thinking.

Of course, there is an important difference between narratives that are just thought through, and narratives that are publicly narrated. The former are much more indeterminate. They are more indeterminate as to activity in the sense that our activity of thinking through a narrative will characteristically not have a precise beginning and end: a problem at work pops

\(^4\) For discussion, see Gendler and Hawthorne (2003). For those who believe that there is such a thing as non-conceptual content, conceiving in this sense could be non-conceptual.

\(^5\) This will be especially relevant in relation to traumatic memories, which I will be discussing in Ch. 3.
into your mind whilst you are queuing to buy a lunchtime sandwich; this thought prompts you to begin to think through a way out of the problem; and then you hear a voice ‘Cashier number seven, please’, and the thread is lost, perhaps to be picked up later, perhaps not. (The same kind of thing can happen in conversation between friends.) And they are more indeterminate as to content simply because the thoughts that make up a thought-through narrative might not be fully formed, so that they can readily be made explicit in speech. For example, your thoughts about the way out of your problem at work might only be partially formed in your mind. E. M. Forster’s famous ‘How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?’ is instructive here, except that it might give the impression that the issue is simply an epistemic one, as if there is something determinate that you are thinking but you cannot know what it is until you utter the words. The mind is messier than that.

6 A narrative is more than just a bare annal or chronicle or list of a sequence of events

A narrative is distinct from what it is a narrative of. To fail to maintain this distinction is to lose the distinction between, on the one side, language and thought, and, on the other side, the world, between representation and what is represented. An effect of the mistake is also to lose the distinction between those narratives (such as historical narratives) that aspire to be true, and those narratives (such as novels) that do not aspire to be true in this sense. All narratives share certain properties in their structural dimension; in other words they all have narrative structure. But not all narratives are alike in their referential dimension: some aspire to reference and to truth and some do not.⁶

Of course, the simple fact that our lives, or episodes in our lives, are not narratives (that is, they are not identical to narratives) does not imply that narratives and narrative thinking cannot play a central part in how we lead our lives. We think, talk, and write about our lives by narrating or thinking through narratives, and how we do this can profoundly affect our lives as such. What emerges, then, is that our narratives of our lives, or of segments of our lives, can be embedded in the lives that we lead, which themselves are not narratives. A simple example can illustrate the point. One evening you are in a restaurant with a friend about to order dinner. It is very stormy

⁶ I will come back to this in Ch. 7 when I discuss the question of truth in narrative, comparing real-life narratives with fictional narratives.
outside. There is a sudden flash of lightning, and the lights suddenly fuse. You then say to your friend, ‘This reminds me of something that happened to me in Bali in 1987,’ and you then proceed to tell her all about it. Your thoughts about those events in Bali in 1987, and what you tell your friend about what happened, are narrative in form. And when your friend listens to what you say, she is engaging with a narrative. This perhaps might make her feel jealous, thinking of your life before she knew you. But those events that took place in Bali in 1987 and that make your friend jealous are themselves no more a narrative than are the events that took place in the restaurant that very evening. There are thus two things to be kept apart: a sequence of events; and a narrative or story of the events, where this is taken as a product in the doubly wide sense that I have been discussing.

It is helpful to compare narratives with annals and chronicles. Annals and chronicles are like narratives in one sense: annals and chronicles are distinct from the events that they are a record of, and in this sense they have a referential dimension just as a narrative has when it is concerned with real-life events. But a mere annal or chronicle of events lacks narrative structure—it does not have the same structural dimension as a narrative. Let us consider some examples. Hayden White gives a nice example of an annal from the *Annals of Saint Gall*, covering events in Gaul in the eighth to the tenth century AD, part of which is as follows:7

710. Hard year and deficient in crops.
711.
712. Flood everywhere.
713.
714. Pippin, Mayor of the Palace, died.
715. 716. 717.
718. Charles devastated the Saxon with great destruction.
719.
720. Charles fought against the Saxons.
721. Theudo drove the Saracens out of Aquitaine.

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